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Filmic Discourses on the Role of the Clergy in Iran

Nacim Pak-Shiraz¹

Until recently, there were only deferential references to the clergy in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Other than leading ritual acts such as prayers, marriages, deaths and sermons, these men of God were removed from the quotidian concerns of ordinary people, and remained largely peripheral to the main characters of the films. Considering the sensitivity of the topic and the strict codes set down by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which bans all films and videos that “blaspheme against the values and personalities held sacred by Islam and other religions mentioned in the Constitution,” this is unsurprising.

However, the new millennium saw a resurgence of films that depicted the clergy as their protagonists. These included Mirkarimi’s² 2001 film *Under the Moonlight*, Tabrizi’s³ *The Lizard* and Qanbari’s *Ou* both in 2004. Each of these films articulates a

¹ This study was made possible through the generosity and unstinting support of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London and for which I am deeply grateful.

² Reza Mirkarimi, a graduate of graphics from Tehran University, was born in 1966. His initial experiences of filmmaking were in short films and television series. *Under the Moonlight* was his second feature film after his debut *The Boy and the Soldier* in 2000. Most of his films carry a religious theme, with his latest work *So Close, So Far*, an entry to the recently introduced “spiritual cinema” category of the 23rd Fajr International Film Festival, winning the Best Film award of the festival.

³ Kamal Tabrizi was born in 1959 and graduated from the Art University in Tehran. After a series of short films and working with the cultural sections of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcast Television, he made his first feature film *The Passage* in 1989. Amongst his other works, before the making of the *Lizard*, the comedy *Leyli is with Me* (1995), is notable for its success. A satire on the Iran-Iraq war, *Leyli is with Me*, employs the same lead actor of *The Lizard*, Parviz Parastooyi, as the television cameraman who, despite his desperate efforts of staying away from the war zone, unwittingly finds himself in the frontline and inadvertently taken for a hero. Many of his films deal with religious themes, a reflection of his own religious background. His latest film, *One Piece of Bread* (2005), is a distinct departure from *The Lizard* with references to the metaphysical world. The screenwriter of this film, Mohammad-Reza Gohari is the co-screenwriter of Mirkarimi’s *So Close, So far*. *One Piece of Bread* was also entered into the “spiritual cinema” category of the 23rd Fajr International Film Festival but it was not received well. Some critics criticised it as a ‘repentance-letter’ to the making of *The Lizard*, a film made to appease those whom he had displeased with his earlier film (Talebi-Nejad, 2006 in *MehrNews*). During the 2005 presidential elections, Hashemi Rafsanjani, who ultimately lost the elections to Ahmadi-Nejad,

discourse that differs from previous representations of the clergy. They not only propose a different engagement of the clergy with the public, but also critically examine the lofty positions they enjoy in society, which in turn serves only to further emphasise their top-down relationship with the laity.

This paper will discuss *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard*, both of which opened to general release in Iran, and draws parallels with current discourses on Iranian clergy. I argue that these filmic narratives provide a space for the articulation of recent debates on the role of the clergy within society, including some of the more contentious issues that have otherwise been difficult to publicly discuss inside Iran. As such, this study demonstrates how these filmmakers have creatively employed the medium of film to actively engage in some of these debates. This paper, therefore, argues that the films do not merely reflect these debates, but are themselves part of the larger discourse within Iranian society. Whilst discourses of intellectuals such as Soroush are accredited texts that are recognised both within and outside of Iran, these parallel filmic discourses have not yet received such recognition.

In fact, this oversight does injustice to the potential of a medium that can be more effective than its written or oral equivalents, particularly in the context of Iran. Firstly, the metaphorical language of film provides a space for discourses that might otherwise face harsh censorship. Even when films are banned, the filmmakers are not punished with the severity reserved for the authors or lecturers of debates propagating similar ideas through their own media. Moreover, a ban on an Iranian film usually turns it into a highly popular commodity with considerable demand for pirated copies. Indeed, filmmakers are sometimes accused of deliberately stirring contentious debates around their films in order to ensure a high sale upon final release. Secondly, the accessibility of the medium has enabled these films to engage effectively with a wider audience, even if these levels of engagement vary according to the background of each individual.

In this paper, I will proceed with briefly studying the clergy's consolidation of power within the historical context of Shii Iran and the subsequent debates that questioned

employed Tabrizi as his campaign manager. Some Iranians sarcastically referred to the campaign film he made for Rafsanjani as *Marmulak II*, [*The Lizard II*].

the legitimacy of this power over the laity. I will then critically examine the current role of the clergy in *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard* and locate these filmic discourses within the wider discussions propounded by Iranian intellectuals. Finally, I will demonstrate how these films subtly compare the institutionalised morals and ideals of society with not only the ethical values of individuals, but also the relevance of religious inscriptions to their everyday modern life.

Superiority of clergy over laity

The claims to power of the Iranian Shii clergy take a unique expression, rooted as it is in the historical and political development of the country. With the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in 1501, Shiism became the official religion of Iran. It was during this time that the clerics developed a hierarchical role that was to evolve to demand obedience from the believers and, ultimately, the right to rule. Over the centuries various events contributed to the growth of power amongst the Iranian Shii clergy, culminating in the Islamic Revolution that brought about their rule. In this section I will briefly examine these historical developments so as to situate the current debates amongst the intellectuals and, consequently, draw parallels with contemporary filmic discourses.

Growth of power

The consolidation of Shiism in Iran came about with the political rise of the Safavids. Until the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in the early 16th century, Iran was not a significant Shii centre. However, from very early on the Safavids patronised and established numerous religious schools, or *madrasas*, on a grand scale. This attracted a steady stream of learned Shii men from other parts of the Islamic world, mainly southern Iraq and Lebanon, and very soon Iran turned into an important Shii centre. It was during the Safavid period that the Shii ulama arrogated to themselves a role that elevated them over the laity. Ordinary people, they argued, “are incapable of recognising and thus unable to choose on their own the most learned and pious from among the ‘ulama’” (Jahanbakhsh, 2001: 123). Thus, the clergy not only enjoyed

political support from the state, but also came to be seen as a necessity in the lives of the believers.

Another factor that contributed to the growth of the clerical power was the victory of the *usuli* or *mujtahidi* school of ulama over the *akhbari* school by the early 19th century. The main difference of interpretation between these two schools lay in the understanding of the role and necessity of the clergy as intermediaries between man and God. The *akhbaris* maintained that “individual believers could understand the Quran and the Traditions (*akhbar*) of the Prophet and the Imams and did not need to follow the guidance of *mujtahids*, who claimed the right of *ijtihad* (‘effort to ascertain correct doctrine’)” (Keddie, 1995: 97). The *usulis*, however, succeeded in asserting the necessity of the *mujtahids* and maintained “every believer was required to follow the rulings of a living *mujtahid*, and whenever there was a single chief *mujtahid*, his rulings took precedence over all others” (Keddie, 1995: 97-98). These *mujtahids* were referred to as *marja’ al-taqlid* or models for emulation. The *usulis* therefore established a clerical power that positioned them as intermediaries between believers and God, and this has been the dominant Shii theology to this date.⁴ Thus, according to this theory, any Shia who has not attained the same level of authoritative judgement in interpreting the law from the sources “must choose a *mujtahid* to be their own spiritual guide (*marja’ al-taqlid*, ‘model for/source of emulation’), whose opinions in matters of religious law are binding on those who follow him” (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 10).

In addition to normalising clerical hierarchy over laity, by the early 19th century, “the Shii clergy were able to get their right to direct collection of religious taxes” (Keddie, 1995: 22). This economic independence further strengthened their position as did their organised ties with the merchants or *bazaaris*. As Keddie states, the ties between these two groups have been very close and very often both were from the same families through intermarriage. Moreover, many of the clerics were occupied in various professions; indeed some of them were *bazaaris*. In fact they “worked together in a variety of ways and influenced each other, so that any picture of

⁴ For a detailed account of the doctrinal reassertion of the *usulis*, lead mainly by Aqa Muhammad Baqir Bihbahani (1705-1803), see Algar (1980: 33-44)

merchants as a discrete group getting ulama as a divergent group to do something is belied by the interconnected history of the two” (Keddie, 1995: 93).

Even though the first records of the ulama’s claims to rule go back to the late 17th century, they did not materialise until the victory of the Islamic Republic in 1979.⁵ Soon after the Revolution, the doctrine of *velayat-i faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist, was introduced. This gave the Leader the final say in the running of country. Named as Leader for Life in the constitution, “Ayatollah Khomeini now combined supreme temporal and religious authority” (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 19). This transition from charismatic leader of the Revolution to head of state seemed natural. Khomeini, however, was initially irresolute when it came to entrusting the reins of the country to the clerics. Indeed, he was concerned that the earthly desires of politics would corrupt the clergy and subsequently jeopardise their credibility with the public (Brumberg, 2001: 118).

Khomeini’s change of position in entrusting the running of the state to the clergy may be traced to a few key incidents soon after he came to power. The deaths of his allies in the 1981 bombings is one such crucial factor. Some 70 of his supporters were killed in the June 1981 bombings of the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP). Two months later, this was followed by the death of two of his other allies, the newly-elected president, Raja’i, and Prime Minister Bahonar. These and other political bombings were blamed on the Islamic-socialist party of Mujahidin-i Khalq (MK). The final straw was when President Bani Sadr, an Islamic modernist opposed to clerical rule, and the leaders of IRP were unable to resolve their differences.⁶ Khomeini then had “little choice but to exercise his ‘revolutionary duties’ by siding with the clerics whose actions deeply worried him” (Brumberg, 2001: 118).

With all rival parties defeated and Khomeini’s stamp of approval on clerical rule, the clergy stabilised their power in the ensuing years. Khomeini, for his part, attempted to

⁵ Keddie reports that the French Huguenot watchmaker, Chardin, “who spent years in Iran, tells us that one group of mujtahids claimed that they were more qualified to rule than were the wine-bibbing, impious shahs (2001: 165).

⁶ For a detailed account of the events that led to the success of the IRP over Bani-Sadr, which reflected the defeat of the moderates and the left-wing political group, see Bakhash (1985: 92-165).

articulate this new responsibility within his theological discourse. He gave it a mystical dimension and asserted that it was not rational knowledge or the need to determine interests that entrusted the clergy with the duty to rule. Rather, this duty “could only ensue from a form of mystical revelation that anyone could strive for, but only a few among the clerics would attain” (Brumberg, 2001: 88). He also delegated the rulings of secondary ordinances – a narrow range of contractual issues that were not directly addressed in the Qur’an – to the clergy. As Brumberg states, these had traditionally fallen within the government’s remit. Khomeini, however, declared that he could not “imagine that God would not have looked at every aspect of any problem” and thus by “implying that secondary rulings were also mandated by God, Khomeini virtually equated the clerical power to issue such ruling with the authority of God himself!” (Brumberg, 2001: 129).

Resistance to monopolising Islam

It was not just the critics of the Revolution who criticised the clergy for arrogating to themselves the power to rule. Rather, from very early on, when the notion of a ruling cleric was first introduced there were those from within the clergy who disagreed with the idea, maintaining that it was better to leave the running of the state to kings. As Keddie observes, “many of the disagreements now found amongst scholars in the West concerning the role of the ulama at various times have their roots in the fact that there was almost never a single line followed by all the ulama, and hence it is often possible to quote ulama, even during one period, on several sides of the same issue (Keddie, 1995: 164). As Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, a reformist cleric in Iran explains, “It cannot be said that the clergy collectively are coterminous with the Islamic Republic” (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 119).

Difficult as it was to criticise the religious establishment within the political climate of the Islamic Republic, it did not remain unchallenged. For instance, Ayatollah Shariat-madari, was the first *marja’* to criticise the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, which resulted in his defrocking in 1982 and subsequent house arrest until his death in 1986. After the Revolution, even those who had proposed the idea of a ruling clergy came, in time, to revise and review their views. The debates on the doctrine of *velayat-e*

faqih are one such example. As this notion developed over the years, differences of opinion arose amongst even those clerics who had initially supported the concept. Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's designated heir, is yet another example. Even though he "played an instrumental role in inserting the *velayat-e faqih* into the constitution" he was later dismissed for being critical of governmental policies and practices as well as being unwilling to "keep silent in the face of what [he] saw to be contrary to his religious beliefs" (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 20-21).

Moreover, a new religious modernist movement emerged from "within the same ideological circles that shaped the revolution" (Jahanbakhsh, 2001: 140). This intellectual movement, headed by Abdulkarim Soroush, questioned the religious establishment and the power that the clergy had endowed upon themselves.⁷ Soroush, a close ally of the Islamic Republic during its conception and early years, turned into one of its most outspoken critics. He has since been disfavoured for his criticism of the theological, philosophical and political underpinnings of the regime. He subsequently lost his job, was barred from teaching, and received numerous death-threats. His public lectures were violently disrupted on many occasions and he ultimately left Iran in the mid-nineties to write and lecture in Europe and North America.

Soroush criticised the cleric's monopoly of Islam and voiced his concerns over the power of the religious seminaries, or *howzehs*, and their close connection with the centre of power. In a talk he gave in 1992 at the University of Isfahan, he said:

After the revolution the clergy took over the nation's management and formulated its governing political theory (the guardianship of the juriconsult), which requires a Hawzeh-trained clergyman with the rank of the grand juriconsult to be the supreme leader of the country...it is self-evident that the religious government entails the

⁷ Mir-Hosseini (2006: 27) discusses the influence of Soroush's theory of relativity of religious knowledge on numerous intellectuals who came to form the foundation of New Religious Thinking in Iran. These included Mashallah Shamsolvaezin and Shahla Sherkat, editors of *Kiyan* and *Zanan* respectively. Both these monthly journals were established in 1991 and became a platform for Islamic dissent within Iran. *Kiyan* published many of Soroush's articles and speeches including his article, "*Hurriyat wa Ruhaniyat*" [*Freedom and the Clerical Establishment*], which questioned the clerical monopoly of religious truth and refuted the clergy's claims of being the sole interpreters of religious knowledge. For a detailed list of Soroush's speeches and articles in both Persian and English see his website www.dr.soroush.com

empowerment of the clergy and the Hawzeh; the religious disciples actually empower those who possess them (Soroush, 2000: 174).

Soroush argues that historically, this empowerment of the clergy and their claims to being the sole interpreters of religion has been one of the main areas of contention between the clergy, and the philosophers, mystics and poets who did not hold the same perspective. He then goes on to state the numerous instances in which the latter group have denounced the power alliances of the juriconsults, and its associated dangers of corruption and abuse (Soroush, 2000: 174-175).

More recently, in October 2000, another cleric, Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, was charged with “apostasy, waging war against God, and other offences resulting from his participation in the [2000 Berlin] conference”⁸ (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 38). His death sentence was later commuted to five years in prison. It was his outspoken views on the mutability of social rulings that brought about such a severe sentence. Eshkevari states three problems with the Islamic Republic’s current form. He states that it broke its promise to the people and instead of being an Islamic Republic, it is now a clerical Republic. The second issue is that the Islamic government became a *fiqhi* and, therefore, sectarian government for it relied solely on the Shii school of thought. This, he stated, is different from a religious government that is not solely confined to the Shii *fiqh* in all its affairs, including “decision-making in the executive, the legislative and the judicial powers” (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 115), for which there is not always have an answer in the *fiqh*. It also excludes the other four schools of Sunni thought and the possibility of their co-existence, for it deems them irrelevant to a society which in fact does have Sunni Muslims. The third problem was that for the first time in history, the Shii institution of *marja’iyat* became

⁸ On 6th-9th April 2000 Eshkevari along with a number of prominent reformists, attended the Berlin Conference titled ‘Iran after the Elections, and the Dynamics of Reform in the Islamic Republic’. The conference was disrupted by two groups of exiled Iranian opposition groups abroad and as Mir-Hosseini and Tapper state, the conference “became notorious in Iran for two things: disruptions by ‘naked’ men and women, and the outspokenness of some of the panellists from Iran” both of which were filmed by the Iranian Television (IRIB) crew, under the conservative’s control (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 37). The carefully edited film was broadcast in Iran to bring the reformists into disrepute. Many of the participants, including Eshkevari, were arrested upon their return to Iran.

a governmental institution. As a result, the *marja*'s lost their independence from the government and subsequently their independence from the political development of the state. Instead, he asserts, the *marja*'s, who were subjects until recently, have become rulers (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 111- 119).

The clergy's growth of authority over the years made them as powerful as never before. However, historically, not all clerics endorsed the idea of endowing the clergy with various religious or political powers. The differences of the *usuli* and *akhhari* schools of thought in the 19th century were one example of the disagreement on the religious empowerment of the clergy. In fact, the clergy were never unanimous in their views, particularly when their right to rule was concerned. Thus, not only did the Islamic Republic develop the most nuanced arguments on the legitimacy of the doctrine of *velayat-i faqih*, it also unwittingly produced some of its finest intellectuals who critically engaged with the doctrine. These critics were not limited to only a small group of secular intellectuals but, more strikingly, extended to many who arose from within the allies of the regime that included the clergy. The relative freedom of expression attained during the initial years of Khatami's presidency (1997-2005) provided the space for a more open debate.⁹ However, any criticism of clerical power and its legitimacy was forcefully suppressed. Nevertheless, the harsh clampdowns on publications that disseminated such 'seditious' views, and the arrest and intimidation of their authors did little to suppress the ideas. Shahidi refers to the period between 1997-2000, as a time during which the greatest achievement of the Iranian press was to introduce "concepts such as 'citizenship,' 'civil society,' 'pluralism,' 'transparency,' 'accountability,' and 'the rights of women, children, and minorities' into the country's political vocabulary" (Shahidi, 2006: 24). It is within this context that *The Lizard* and *Under the Moonlight* become significant works that need to be studied and located within the larger intellectual debates of the current role

⁹ Arjomand (2000) states that the reconstitution of the Expediency Council in early 1997 and its role as an advisory board on major policies of the regime, was in fact a demotion of the president who subsequently lost his powers in determining the state policies. Despite the difficulty of implementing new legislations, however, Khatami succeeded in reopening the constitutional principles and his Government Spokesman and Minister of Culture at the time, Ataollah Mohajerani, withdrew many of the restrictions on the press. This provided the space for open debate and "most importantly of all, the taboo on the discussion and questioning of the principle of theocratic government in the press, was broken for good" (Arjomand, 2000: 288).

of the clergy in Iran.

Parable on the World of the Clergy

Both *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard* are films that function as parables. They not only depict the world of the clergy in its current form within Iranian society, but also include a moral vision of how it ought to be. Through Seyyed's eyes in *Under the Moonlight* and Reza's in *The Lizard*, we enter these two worlds and are at once presented with the contradictions between the two. In examining the current role of the clergy, these filmic discourses evoke the debates of intellectuals who have critically engaged with the doctrines that empower the clergy. Interestingly, even though both films discuss many similar issues, *Under the Moonlight* was screened without much controversy whereas *The Lizard* was forced to pull out of cinemas within a month.

Religion serving the clergy

Under the Moonlight is the first post-Revolutionary film that critically examines the status of the clergy within society. It is about a young seminarian, Seyyed Hasan, who has approached the end of his studies at the seminary and is preparing to don the clerical attire. He appears hesitant to take on the clerical role, and only half-heartedly proceeds with the preparations because of the persistent pressures from his father and teachers. However, a street urchin, Joojeh, steals his supplies and Seyyed's pursuit of the boy leads him to an unfamiliar world of social outcasts who have set up a makeshift camp under a highway bridge in Tehran.

Under the Moonlight begins with a contrast between the life of the clergy and that of the public. As Seyyed, the seminarian student, looks out of the window of an overcrowded, hot, public bus, he sees a cleric on the highway waiting for his driver to finish the tyre-change. Such comparative sequences are scattered throughout the film and illustrate the difference between the upper world of the seminary in which Seyyed resides and the lower world of the under-bridge camp where the outcasts live. The sheltered life of the seminarian students within the confines of an elegant edifice replete with beautiful gardens and ponds, is in stark contrast to the rough lives of the

homeless. This is particularly evident in the case of the child character Joojeh who, in the guise of a street vendor, steals and traffics in drugs in order to earn a living. We also see some of the clerics acting against what they preach. The hypocrisy of the senior cleric is emphasised by the juxtaposition of his complaints about the seminary's electricity bill as a waste of money and, therefore, against the ethical principles of Islam, with his desire to obtain a mobile phone despite its extra costs. He is depicted in various scenes throughout the film either going through invoices and bills, or being constantly on his mobile phone arranging or closing deals.

Soroush has variously criticised the clergy's dependence on religion as a source of income. He states that the clergy "are not defined by their erudition or their virtues but their dependency on religion for their livelihood" (Soroush, 2000: 19). For him, being a cleric must not constitute a job or profession, for religion then becomes a means to an end. Consequently, instead of defending and pursuing religious knowledge, the clergy are in danger of defending their professional interests to maximise their income. He thus argues that

individuals who represent the greatest potential for corruption are those who, after receiving their religious education, base their livelihood on the cultivation and defense of a particular notion of Islam. Their livelihood depends upon the successful advancement of this religious interpretation, and to maximize the former they may compromise the latter (Vakili, 1997: 17).

In *Under the Moonlight*, the clergy seem to be more concerned in maintaining their façade than endeavouring towards the value systems they preach. The senior cleric, for example, complains about seminarian students who drink Coke on the streets together or grow their hair long, and asserts that this is unbecoming of a cleric in robe. However, when faced with the pain of people such as the homeless, he prefers to close his eyes to the suffering around him. In the senior cleric's view, it is the times that have changed and Seyyed should not feel responsible for any of it. He says, "It was not supposed to be this way. I don't know where we went wrong or are paying off which sin." In fact, he exempts himself from taking any action by delegating these social problems to Divine Will and reading them as acts of punishment. The film, therefore, subtly depicts the deviation of the clergy's concern from the wellbeing of society to a self-centred preservation of their status.

The clergy thus appear to have forgotten an important part of their duty. They have failed to look out for those in need. The homeless living under the bridge are a 'collection' as they call themselves. They have both the physically and mentally disabled amongst themselves, and a leader figure called Rostam. As his name indicates, Rostam acts as a *javanmard* in the group, a man of integrity, honour and chivalry.¹⁰ Rostam evokes the physical strength and championship of his namesake in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the 10th-century Persian epic. The Rostam of *Shahnameh* is one of its best-known heroes, a great warrior and champion. The Rostam of *Under the Moonlight* was a wrestler in his younger days, around whom crowds would gather to watch him break free from heavy chains. His self-effacement, another important component of a *javanmard*, is also evident in the way he looks out for the welfare of his friends and shares whatever little he has with them. In fact, despite their miserable conditions, the people in the group care for each other deeply. Indeed, the love and care shown by and amongst these outcasts by far exceeds that of the world of the seminary. Many other Iranian films have also highlighted the plight of the underprivileged. However, *Under the Moonlight* differs from them in that the destitute conditions of the poor are not contrasted with the affluent living in the north of Tehran, but the clergy in the seminary.

This contrast can also be read as a subtle reference to the unrealised dream of social justice promised by Khomeini before and during the early days of the Revolution. Khomeini had pledged to defend the rights of the oppressed classes (*mostaza'fin*) by bringing in social justice and narrowing the social gap between the rich and poor. Even though proposals on the welfare of the oppressed were drafted and put forward to the first parliament of the Islamic Republic, they remained ultimately unsustainable in the social and political climate of the Revolution.¹¹ However, the social status and financial gain of close allies of the regime, including some clergy, continued to improve noticeably.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the social and ethical code of *javanmard* in modern day Iran, see Adelkhah (1999).

¹¹ For a comprehensive account of the economic situation during the early years of the Revolution, see Ehteshami (1995:88-99).

Under the Moonlight thus highlights the marginalisation and alienation of the very same people who were promised a just rule by the Islamic Republic. Not only have the rights of these people not been defended, but their living conditions have also deteriorated – a point evident from their nostalgic references to the past. Their presence in the film is, therefore, a reference to the dark reality of the conditions of the marginalised and the failure of the Revolution to fulfil its promise of social justice.

Clergy serving the public

Even though *Under the Moonlight* is critical of the current position of the clergy in Iran, it does not in any way attempt to denounce the religious institutions or the clergy per se. Instead it reflects on the purpose and role of the clergy in society, which appears to have been misunderstood not only by the public but also by some of the clergy themselves. Seyyed's grandfather serves as an example of the noble role of the clergy. He, and not the seminarian teachers, remain an inspiration to Seyyed. We learn that the grandfather was a simple man who lived in the village and earned his living by working on the fields. He practiced what he preached and was, therefore, a trusted member of the community in which he lived. It was the good of society that preceded his personal interests. As Seyyed himself puts it, his reluctance to don the clerical robes stems out of a fear of not deserving the honour. It is clear that for him, the honour lies in humbly serving the people, and he fears being incapable of fulfilling this noble calling.

Most importantly, this film revolves around Seyyed's search. As such, he interprets the unfolding of events as a Divine sign. Thus, when Joojeh steals his supplies, he initially considers it as God's way of telling him not to proceed with finalising his education as a cleric. However, his search for Joojeh turns into the spiritual journey through which he finally realises his purpose in life. Interestingly, this is achieved after Rostam includes Seyyed in his letter to God asking Him to answer their pleas. Seyyed wakes up the next morning under the open-topped dome of the mosque with a white dove flying out into the light.

When Seyyed fails to appear at the donning ceremony, his roommate, who has already worn the clerical robes, rushes to him to try and persuade Seyyed to do so. He dismisses Seyyed's justifications and sounds the real reason: it is clear that Seyyed is hesitant because he has become suspicious of the clergy. As his roommate says, "Do you think they are kingly robes? No! They are work clothes, labour clothes! There are good and bad people in all types of work, why don't you try and be one of the good ones? You used to say that even if you are able to guide one person, then you must wear the robe!"

The phrase "kingly robes", can be read as a reference to the dissident clerics who criticise those within the clergy who have taken on kingly lifestyles. Ayatollah Montazeri had also voiced his concerns on the kingly robes of the *vali-ye faqih*.¹² Breaking nearly ten years of political silence in November 1997, a few months after Khatami's landslide victory in the presidential elections, he gave a sermon in Qom criticising the corruption of the *velayat-e faqih* and the justifications for its authoritarian rule. In his words, "*Velayat-e faqih* does not mean having a royal organisation and ceremonial travels that cost billions and the like. These things are not compatible with the *vali-ye faqih*" (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 105).

Kadivar, another dissident cleric and a senior student of Montazeri who spent a few years in the prisons of the Islamic Republic for his criticism of the doctrine of *vali-ye faqih* compares the Islamic Republic with the absolute monarchy they had intended to end.¹³ The Islamic Republic, he states, failed to eliminate monarchical oppression and instead "succeeded in transforming the face of monarchy in Iran; autocratic rule and monarchical relations have remained intact, and are reproduced in the form of the absolute *velayat-e faqih*" (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 109). In comparing democratic rule with that of the *velayat-e faqih*, he states that the rule of the *faqih* does not provide the public with equal access to power within the public domain and subsequently alienates them within this sphere (Kadivar, 2002).

¹² Menashri (2001: 13-41) discusses the debates over *marja'iyat*, particularly the opposition of clerical and lay intellectuals that followed Khamene'i's appointment as supreme leader after Khomeini.

¹³ Kadivar (1998, 1999a and 1999b). On Kadivar, see Vahdat (2005). For a detailed list of Kadivar's speeches and summary of articles in Persian visit www.Kadivar.com

The parable of The Lizard

Even though *The Lizard* is a different film to *Under the Moonlight*, in both genre and approach, the issues it raises are very similar. *Marmulak* or *The Lizard* is about a convicted thief, Reza, known as Reza Marmulak or Reza the Lizard. When he is taken to hospital after an attempted suicide in prison, he succeeds in stealing the robes of a cleric hospitalised next to him. The rest of the film is about Reza's attempts to escape the country and being trapped in the role of a cleric. Like *Under the Moonlight*, *The Lizard* functions as a parable. It also examines the relevance of theological reasoning to everyday real life. In addition, it explores the role of the clergy, their relationship with laity, and the notion of forced religious morals.

The storyline of *The Lizard* is a familiar plot of comedy resulting from the incongruity of displacement. A criminal dressed as a cleric and forced to act as one had been depicted in various earlier films, going as far back as Charlie Chaplin's 1923 film *The Pilgrim*. Like *The Lizard*, *The Pilgrim* depicted a very similar story of an escaped convict grabbing the clothes of a bathing minister and subsequently pretending to be a clergyman. However, as Butler states, during its time it was received with a "shocked indignation" in some parts (1969: 181). Over 80 years later, this storyline still caused heated reactions amongst audiences, authorities and particularly the clergy, in Iran.

The Lizard was never officially banned but the stir it caused was enough for its creators to decide to take it off the screens. However, this did not entail defeat. The film had already succeeded on so many different levels that its withdrawal from the cinema screens did little to damage it. Financially, the film had already made a significant profit.¹⁴ It also won the audience award for the most popular film, the best screenplay, and the special jury award for its lead character, Parviz Parastooyi as well

¹⁴ The BBC NEWS reports that by the time *The Lizard* opened in America, it had already made \$1 million dollars in Iran with cinemas being forced to schedule extra screening to meet the huge demand. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/3786905.stm>, 9th June 2004.

as the Interfaith Juries award in the 22nd Fajr International Film Festival (2004).¹⁵ It successfully spoke to the largest-ever Iranian audience on a sensitive issue such as the clergy. Additionally, even though it was aimed at domestic audiences, it succeeded in transcending national and cultural borders, becoming the first Iranian comedy to participate in some of the best-known international film festivals.¹⁶ It also introduced a different style of Iranian films to foreign audiences. As some non-Iranian audiences commented, they were pleased to finally see an Iranian film which not only had a tight narrative but was also not depressing!¹⁷

The Lizard became the first post-Revolutionary film to position a cleric as the subject of its comedy. Even though it went on screen only for a month, it became the biggest box-office hit in the history of Iranian cinema.¹⁸ The real audience of this film, however, exceeded the box-office figures. Very soon pirated copies were circulating and almost everyone in the country had seen it. The images of an irreligious convict pretending to be a man of God and leading the faithful made for some of the most humorous moments in film. However, the film aroused such fury amongst the clerics that they refused to acknowledge even its redemptive side, which allowed for a more favourable view of the clergy. Tabrizi, the director, narrates that in his attempts to gain the clergy's approval he arranged a private screening for them and their families.¹⁹ He wanted them to see for themselves that the film was not a hostile take on the clergy. They were, however, not convinced. Even though their families found it funny and were laughing heartily during the screening, the clerics seated on the

¹⁵ For a list of the awards of the 22nd Fajr International Film Festival, See the official website of the Farabi Foundation on:

http://www.fajrfestival.ir/english/fajr/asp/awards.asp?f_number=22

¹⁶ *The Lizard* participated in numerous international festivals including The Times BFI 48th London Film Festival (2004). Parviz Parastooi, the lead character of the film, was the 4th runner up for best actor in the Seattle International Film Festival (19th May – 12th June 2005), the biggest international film festival in the U.S. see: <http://www.seattlefilm.org/festival/film/detail.aspx?id=5222&fid=5>. The film was also screened in the Asia 2004 Fukuoka International Film Festival. (10th - 20th September, 2004) see <http://www.focus-on-asia.com/e/report/2004/The-Lizard.html>

¹⁷ The author spoke with some non-Iranian members of the audience after the screening of the film at the London Film Festival.

¹⁸ BBC News: "It has now become the most successful Iranian film ever following its release in the US". See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/3786905.stm>, 9th June 2004.

¹⁹ Interview with the author in Iran on February 2005.

other side failed to see the humour.

Like *Under the Moonlight*, *The Lizard* is also a social commentary that is critical about the clergy's position within society. It is, however, more daring in its approach. The film is filled with bold references that criticise the current approach to religion and its enforcement within society. Reza, the lizard had become Reza, the cleric. In Persian, 'lizard' has many connotations. Even though it appears to be a reference to Reza's artistry in climbing up walls, one cannot miss its other overtones. Lizard also refers to a sly, scheming person who can easily change colours. This reference in the film could be easily stretched to the clergy.

The creators of *The Lizard* employed film to step on uncharted territories. As King puts it, "Comedy, by definition is not usually taken seriously, a fact that sometimes gives it licence to tread in areas that might otherwise be off-limits" (2002: 2). As mentioned earlier, the film functions as a parable and through Reza's eyes we enter both the ideal and the real worlds of the clergy. In the world as it is, Reza benefits from a privileged status within society. He is easily exempted from paying a fine for driving in the wrong direction and enjoys special treatment on the train. Nevertheless, this status is also accompanied with public contempt for the clergy. For example, Reza finds it difficult to get a ride when dressed in the clerical robe, for people are unwilling to give him a lift.

The world as it ought to be, however, is one that places the clergy and laity on level ground. Reza demonstrates this through his interaction with the people around him. Even if unwittingly, he succeeds in drawing people back to the mosque and gaining their respect. We see a world in which the clergy inspire and lead people to participate in the good of society, defending the helpless and weak against injustice, and tolerating human faults and weakness. Reza Marmulak, forced to act as the cleric of the village, is unable to get in touch with Motazedi, the underground criminal who is supposed to deliver his fake passport for him to cross the border. Thus, during the day he dresses as a cleric and at night, "disguised" in ordinary clothes, he looks for Motazedi. When Reza finally finds Motazedi's house, he finds out that Motazedi has been arrested and imprisoned. The inquisitive Gholamali and his friend secretly follow Marmulak and witness not only his various visits to houses in the deprived

areas but also the prayers of Motazedi's mother who thanks him for his generosity. They interpret this "disguised" nocturnal roaming as acts of charity during which he sets out to help the needy. This also alludes to following the example of Ali, the first Shii Imam, and his charitable acts. Indeed, Ali would roam the city at night in disguise and take food and sustenance to the orphans and needy. When Gholamali and his friends spread the word, the village people are so moved that they implore Marmulak to allow them to participate in his good deeds. Thus, every night they visit the poor, sick and needy and provide them with gifts and company.

Reza also displays an acute sense of justice and chivalry. He is furious with the village thugs who harass the village shopkeeper and vandalise his property, but feels it inappropriate to fight off the thugs whilst in his robes. However, he can no longer hold his peace when he finds out that the leader of the local gang of thugs has locked himself in with his ex-wife, Faezeh, to try and bully her into getting back together. To the villagers' astonishment he climbs the walls to the second floor and lets himself in to the house. The villagers are then faced with a bleeding ex-husband who, despite his mass, has been clearly beaten up by the cleric. This wins Reza an even further popularity, for now even the thugs and their leader develop a great respect for him.

In this visionary world, the cleric earns respect and achieves leadership not through preaching about punishment and fear, or by legal enforcement, but rather by setting an example himself. In fact, towards the end of the film, Reza ceases even to sit on the pulpit. Instead, he sits on its lowest step and suggests that together they should think about the meaning of the plural ways of reaching God. In his sermons, he invites people to enjoy the pleasures of life. His teachings are not in opposition to human desire but he does advise a more careful handling of such instinctual desire. Thus, in contrast to Gholamali's father who is concerned that singing in the mosque or the interaction with the opposite sex constitute impermissible acts, Reza decrees them as permissible.

The visionary world is not limited only to that of Reza acting as a man of God. As illustrated at the beginning of the film, his short interaction with the cleric in the hospital, also called Reza, provides an image of the clergy as it ought to be. This cleric does not arrogate to himself special privileges, evident in that he has been

hospitalised in a public hospital and the fact that he earns a living through craftsmanship. As discussed earlier, Soroush emphasises the need for the clergy to earn their living through sources other than religious activity in order to maintain their integrity with the faith. The cleric in the hospital does not distance himself from Reza the Lizard, nor does he scorn the latter's contempt for the clergy. The inspirational passages he reads are not from Islamic sources but Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*. Truth, he says, is not found only in one source, but experienced through multiple interpretations.

In a theocratic state endorsing an exclusivist and official interpretation of Islam, *The Lizard* proposed a pluralistic approach – an argument comparable to Soroush's ideas of multiple interpretations of Islam. In a speech given at London's Centre for the Study of Democracy in November 2006, Soroush asserted that Islam is nothing but a series of interpretations, and interpretations are intrinsically pluralistic. However, those who have based their power on a particular interpretation of Islam are reluctant to allow other interpretations, and reject them as heresy. The pluralism of interpretation is, nevertheless, inevitable and he argues that the clerics need to engage with this aspect of Islam. Since there is no "True" interpretation, one can correct and modify the existing ones but it is then logically impossible to possess the best interpretation. As such, Soroush proposed a plurality of "right paths" rather than "One Right Path".

Both *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard* are social commentaries protesting not the relevance of the clergy in a believer's life, but rather criticising the role that some of them have currently undertaken in society. What Mir-Karimi and Tabrizi, the two filmmakers, achieve in their respective films above, is to raise many of these controversial issues and question the positions held by the clergy. As demonstrated in the discussion above, these discourses fall into the larger body of works that question the legitimacy of the clerical power and their role within society. The ideas these filmmakers propose draw from the thought of intellectuals such as Soroush, Kadivar and Eshkevari, but expressed through the medium of film.

Morals and Values

Seyyed's spiritual search and his hesitation at taking on the role of the clergy is depicted beautifully in *Under the Moonlight*. When he wakes up under the dome of the mosque, the white dove flying into the light and the satisfaction on his face betrays a search about to be fulfilled. That day Seyyed sells his books to feed the homeless, a symbolic act of carrying out the instructions in these books, rather than merely reading them in the confines of his seminary. A few days later, when the city cleaners are commissioned to clear the camp under the bridge, a heart-broken Seyyed complains to God, cries to him and sings to him, in a manner reminiscent of Rostam's unsophisticated and informal conversation with God.

Relevance of seminarian teachings

One of the other important points that both films raise is the relevance of seminarian teaching and the Sharia to real-life situations. In *Under the Moonlight*, having witnessed the desperate situation of the street urchin, Joojeh, and his friends, it is very difficult to empathise with those seminarians advocating a strict adherence to the principle of chopping off the hands of thieves. The impossibility of following all the prescribed rules in daily life is further demonstrated amongst the seminarians themselves. In fact, the ideals of the new student at the seminary, who zealously follows the religious texts, provide the comic relief of the film. For example, when the fervid student reminds Seyyed and his roommate that the religious texts consider having eggs at night to be reprehensible (*makruh*), Seyyed's friend adds some tomato sauce and supposedly removes the reprehension from the act, turning it into a permissible one.

The Lizard also questions the relevance of the seminarian teachings to real-life. This is depicted through the constant questioning of the keen young man shadowing Reza Marmulak. Most of these questions are completely irrelevant to Iranians, such as daily prayers at the North Pole or the religious duties of a Muslim in Space. The film thus subtly implies that some of the current religious discourses are far removed from the practical affairs of life and are, therefore, of little avail to society. The clergy's

engagement with these matters is thus seen as not only being pointless but also as distant from the laity as Iran is to the North Pole or Space. The film therefore suggests that people's more immediate problems could be dealt with in a way that better bridges the gap between real-life and the values and ideals held dear by society.

As mentioned before, amongst other accusations for which Eshkevari was sentenced to death, was questioning the relevance of religious rulings within today's context. In fact he asserted that some social rulings were mutable for they were Arab and tribal customs. Appropriated by the Prophet, they were, therefore, subject to review. Thus, they were no longer considered to be absolute and divine decrees incumbent on Muslims, but rather changeable laws that should be reviewed within their time and place. In the controversial Berlin Speech of 2000, Eshkevari divided social rulings into two categories. He allocated the first to rulings about worship and classified them as irrevocable. On the second he said:

I would claim that these social rulings of Islam are mutable in essence and by their very nature, even if parts of them come from the Koran...In Islamic *fiqh* we have a principle that says that the ruling follows the subject matter...It means that when a subject matter changes, the rulings too will change. But if the subject matter remains unchanged, the ruling will not change (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 165).

Eshkevari then goes on to propose a reconsideration of certain social laws from being irrevocable principles to becoming changeable laws. These included women's rights and the choice to wear the *hijab*. In this way, he proposed that religious rules were not divine rules but rather social contracts that could be changed in line with the needs of time and context.

In certain circumstances in the films, the very knowledge of the clergy is deemed irrelevant to the life of the laity. For example, on his first encounter with the homeless people, Seyyed is asked for the spelling of a word. He begins with providing the spelling, the etymology and root of the word, but the destitute man cuts him short. He is not interested. Seyyed's learning is irrelevant to this man's problems – he just needs the spelling that any educated person should be able to provide.

God, however, remains a central part in the lives of both the seminarian and the homeless even though they differ drastically in their relationship with Him. The clergy employ a rigid and formal relationship with God in the form of prayers, worship, and praising of His attributes. The homeless people on the other hand, employ a very casual vocabulary in speaking with Him. Rostam, the homeless, who firmly believes in God and His kindness, is not afraid to use slang terms to protest against the injustices inflicted upon them. He dictates a letter to God and after complaining about His negligence of them, outlines a list of things they need from Him and includes Seyyed's name in it. As discussed earlier, according to the dominant Shii theology since the 19th century, the ulama had taken on the role of intermediaries between God and the believers. In this case, however, Rostam demonstrates his free and direct relationship with God and he, ironically, acts as an intermediary between God and Seyyed. Interestingly, Seyyed finds the answer to his search the very next morning. In *The Lizard*, Reza, the convict-acting-as-a-cleric, summarises the film's view on the laity's relationship with God in his sermon at the local prison. He states that God cannot be monopolised by good people. Instead, He is also the God of criminals, who does not differentiate amongst His men. Evil, in fact, occurs through the selfish acts of those who are unwilling to share their good fortunes with the less fortunate.

These two films as a whole advocate a definition of God that is not bound to theological reasoning but rather, based on unconditional love and faith. One of the points of departure between mystics and the ulama has been the relationship of the believer with God. Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet, and one of the greatest mystics of Islam, narrates the story of Moses and the Shepherd. In his *Mathnavi* (verses 1727-1791), Rumi relates that Moses overhears an illiterate shepherd praying to God and imploring Him to come out of hiding so that he can demonstrate his love for him, and feed Him, massage His feet, comb His hair and mend His shoes. Moses rebukes the shepherd for using blasphemous language and the shepherd is devastated to realise that his expression of love and devotion are considered sacrilegious. But Moses receives a revelation reproaching him for distancing His sincere believer from Him and which continues: *You were sent to join together, not to cause a rift and disunion*. Rumi endorses this sincere and direct relationship with God that is independent of the mediation of the jurisprudents. As Soroush states, this recognition

that there is an understanding beyond scholarly learning has long been a struggle between the mystics and the juriconsults. “The quarrel of some philosophers, mystics, and poets with the juriconsults has not been merely academic but has been based on real differences of perspective on religious issues” (Soroush, 2000: 174).

One of the reasons for Reza’s success as a cleric in *The Lizard* is that he succeeds in communicating with people in their own language. Soroush highlights the importance of the seminary’s task in training effective speakers and states that the preachers must be:

able to guide the people using simple and accessible language, fables, examples and poems in order to convey moral commands, religious wisdom, and catechismic principles. There is now no faculty in the seminaries dedicated to the art of preaching even though this is one of the duties of the Hawzeh; this vocation falls to the talent and initiative of individuals (Soroush, 2000: 175)

Forced religious morals

From the outset, *The Lizard* criticises the forced religious morals within Iranian society. This is depicted through the prison warden who wants to send his prisoners to heaven even if by force, as well as Gholamali’s father who constantly pressures his son to memorise the Qur’an. The thick glasses of the soldier who carries out the warden’s orders represent a blind following of the edicts. Interestingly, the new seminarian in *Under the Moonlight*, who is a strict observer of the literal interpretation of the religious law, also wears thick glasses. They both represent people with a narrow view of the world, one that is not gained, reasoned or drawn from experience, but rather handed down to them. These are people who receive the prescribed orders without giving them any further thought, or considering their relevance to the real world. In short, they are unable to see for themselves.

The notion of serving the public is also studied critically within contemporary Iranian society. Serving is interpreted either as punishment or abused for personal interests. The prison warden in *The Lizard*, for example, serves the prisoners through his dictatorial regime, and the police officer defines his service to the public in catching thieves and putting them into prison. Punishment, therefore, is seen as a tool of

service. The parliamentary candidate on the other hand indulges in acts of generosity and service only to facilitate the fulfilment of his ambitions. The film also questions those who totally engross themselves in religious learning and subsequently distance themselves from society and service to it. As evidenced by Gholamali's father, it is more important that his son memorise the Qur'an than set out on nocturnal missions of serving the people and helping the needy.

The films also compare the ethical values of laity with that of the enforced and institutionalised moral standards of the state. For example, *The Lizard* humanises both the clergy and the criminals but in different ways. The criminals are not evil but help out each other in times of difficulty. Jackson, the underworld criminal and Reza Marmulak's friend, helps him to escape the borders. Motazedi, who fakes passports, honours his word. As his mother says, she has brought up her child with an appropriate understanding of the forbidden and permissible acts (*halal* and *haram*). He earns his money, even if it is through unlawful work. The hospitalised cleric who helps Reza the Lizard and is an exemplar of the clergy as they ought to be, does not believe in punishment as a solution and is in fact complicit in the Lizard's escape. Later, when Reza Marmulak is forced to act as a cleric, his namesake, the cleric in the hospital, remains an important inspiration for him.

In *Under the Moonlight*, the God-fearing seminarians who have devoted their lives to the worship of God and study of the sacred texts, show little engagement with the laity outside and are almost oblivious to their suffering. The dwellers under the bridge on the other hand, are "sinners", petty criminals, and drug-dealers, but compassionate, nonetheless. Joojeh's sister, a prostitute who attempts suicide, has already committed two of the 'great sins'. However, after being saved by Seyyed, who takes her to the hospital, she in turn becomes an instrument of his salvation. Just before the enrobing ceremony, which he is unwilling to attend, while his roommate trying to persuade him otherwise, she delivers a parcel that contains his stolen garbs – a sign that alludes to his ability of saving souls.

We then see Seyyed finally dressed in the clerical robes and on his way to save Joojeh. Seyyed, a humble man who is deeply concerned with the suffering of the world around him, proceeds to take Joojeh out of the young offenders institution

where he is imprisoned. Seyyed asks to read his hand, the same trick that Joojeh had used to rob him off his supplies. This last sequence bears one of the most powerful shots of the film. He speaks in Joojeh's vocabulary and affectionately tells him that he is going to take him out of the prison and to his village with him. There is no hint of preaching or use of theological jargon in Seyyed's talk. Indeed, he believes in guiding Joojeh through love rather than disciplining him by cutting his hand off, an emphasis on saving the soul rather than punishing the body.

In *The Lizard*, the robe is seen as a taming device, as Reza Marmulak refers to it at the end of the film. However, it does not so much transform Reza as give him an opportunity to bring to the surface the best of his qualities. It does not in and of itself provide Reza with morals and values. In fact, from the very outset of the film it is clear that even though Reza is a criminal and has forgotten how to pray formally, he is not an immoral person or someone without values. Despite being convicted of armed robbery, he has never touched a weapon and considers bearing arms outside his principles. Even though he is not an outwardly practising Muslim, he has his own Islamic principles – he does not steal during the holy months of Ramadan, Muharram and Safar. He does not endorse the unequal treatment of women or the hypocritical attitude of some men, who use religious sanctions to satisfy their sexual desires. In fact, he employs the *fiqh* terminology to strongly condemn these acts. He does really pay Motazedi's mother out of kindness when he finds out that her son and sole breadwinner has been imprisoned. He does not abuse the trust of Faezeh, the young woman, even though he is obviously very attracted to her. Instead, he gives up his golden opportunity of spending some alone-time with her, to her ex-husband. There is a possibility for Faezeh to have a future with her ex-husband, but none with him. Therefore, he sacrifices his desire for her good. In some instances, the robe is more an impediment to his values than a vehicle to serve. For example, when the thugs beat up the old shopkeeper, Reza mumbles, "If only Islam had not tied up my hands!" In short, his involvement with religion had provided him with an opportunity to lead a more meaningful and purposeful life.

Conclusion

Both *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard* are social commentaries that critically

examine the role and status of the clergy. However, none of them outrightly accept or reject the religious institutions. The filmic discourses are in fact a continuation of an ongoing debate in Iran. Like Soroush, Eshkevar and Kadivar, the filmmakers Mirkarimi and Tabrizi articulate their positions from a religious viewpoint. The films do not endorse the notion of clergy as men of power with unlimited authority over people's private and public lives, nor do they deem the clergy irrelevant to modern day Iranian society. Instead, they are an invitation to review our understanding of religion and its current role in society. In *Under the Moonlight*, Mir-Karimi dares to break through the enclosed quarters of the seminary, and with an unapologetic approach, examines the relationship of the seminarians with each other, the outside world, as well as the relevance of their theological understanding to the real world. *The Lizard* highlights the enforcement of "one particular" interpretation of Islam and contrasts it with a pluralistic approach to the understanding of Islam. They both propose a more fluid relationship between people, the clergy and the Divine that is not restricted within the rigid boundaries of the seminarian debates. Even though the films, particularly *The Lizard*, are subversive in that they question the role of the clergy in society, they remain affirmative of the role of religion in one's life.

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